



On the Path to Great Results for the District Public Schools

**Testimony of
Mr. John W. Hill
Chief Executive Officer
Federal City Council**

**Presented to
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs,
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal
Workforce, and the District of Columbia**

**The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman
The Honorable George V. Voinovich, Ranking Member**

**Dirksen Senate Office Building
Room 342
Friday, March 14, 2008
10:00 AM**

Good morning, Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich, and other members of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia. I am John Hill, Chief Executive Officer of the Federal City Council. The Federal City Council is a non-profit organization comprised of approximately 250 business and civic leaders in the D.C. area, all of whom are focused on creating strong partnerships between the District and the business community to benefit District residents. I am pleased to be here before you today to present testimony regarding the performance of the D.C. Public Schools under its new structure and under the new leadership of Mayor Adrian Fenty and his team.

The Federal City Council was created in 1954 as a mechanism for the business community to organize and participate meaningfully in the civic progress of the District of Columbia. Over the past five decades, there have been a number of complex and challenging projects that the Council has embraced as critical to revitalizing downtown, providing housing, improving public safety, or strengthening neighborhoods. However, as many of our members have come to realize, it has become clear that the foundation for the District's future success is our public education system. The decades-long neglect of D.C. public schools has produced and perpetuated, in my opinion, the ills that persist in many pockets of the District: crime, illiteracy, substance abuse, joblessness, welfare dependency, income inequality, and poverty. When you have a city that has prospered as D.C. has, especially over the past ten years, the neglect and inequality that has resulted from our broken education system are more than evident. For this reason, public education reform has been a top priority for the Federal City Council for many years.

In 1989, the Federal City Council formed the Committee on Public Education (COPE), at the request of the D.C. Board of Education and the Superintendent, and in partnership with the D.C. Council and Mayor. At the time, the school system had 88,000 students. We were seeing four out of ten teenagers drop-out of school before graduation. Those children who did graduate were two years behind in reading and math. Our graduates had difficulty getting the jobs created in the District. This sounds all too familiar to our current condition. COPE brought together 64 individuals, representing the civic community, business community, educational institutions, and national education experts to recommend a path forward for school reform. Our report, issued that year, set forth recommendations. These included recommendations to modernize school facilities; reduce administrative overhead; streamline the central office; upgrade principal and teacher training; provide incentive pay for superior teachers; strengthen programs and standards in reading, writing, and math; expand the use of technology in the classroom; and begin to focus more on at-risk children at the ages of 3 to 6 years old.

At the time, the work of COPE had helped to establish a broad base of support for school reform, but these recommendations were never advanced, due primarily to the dire financial conditions that developed in the early 1990s and reached a crisis point mid-decade. Ultimately, we learned that, in order to realize real school reform, change has to be embraced and led by District partners, and this did not come to fruition. The tremendous momentum behind education reform among members of our organization stayed strong, and some of it was directed into a new charter school movement that began to take hold. The Federal City Council started a D.C. Public Charter School Resource Center to assist with this effort, and today, it is clear that many D.C. parents have opted to place their children in a public charter school rather than in a more traditional public school setting. While this has contributed to the decline in D.C. Public School enrollment and its financial resources, public charter schools have become an option for parents and students seeking a better education.

Over the past decade, our organization has stayed close to the changes and reform efforts of the public school system, but it was Mayor Adrian Fenty who placed education reform front and center for the District. The Federal City Council strongly supported his efforts last year to gain responsibility for school reform, and we helped to raise funds for this initiative. Not surprisingly, we were re-introduced to many of the same alarming indicators of student performance that we had seen twenty years ago. We feel that, because the Mayor has made school reform his top priority, the window of opportunity is now open to produce real and lasting reform. No one knows how long this window will remain open, so we fully support the District's moving quickly to set a solid foundation for the future. The costs of moving slowly, at this point, are too high, and these costs will be borne mostly by our children.

We have worked with the Mayor's leadership team over the past year as well. Deborah Gist has shown herself to be an energetic, competent, motivating and determined State Superintendent of Education, who has embraced the challenge and new responsibilities she has been given. Allen Lew has been a familiar face

to us because of his outstanding work with the Washington Convention Center and the new Nationals ballpark, and we believe that he is the right person to bring school facilities up to a standard of excellence. The person we are working with most closely is Chancellor Michelle Rhee, and this is because we know she has the toughest road to travel and many more storms to weather if we are truly going to see an improvement in the school system. Overall, we think the leadership team is one that can move the school system forward, but there is much work to be done.

In our view, there are two fundamental aspects to bringing about meaningful school reform in D.C. – vision and financial resources. We have confidence in Chancellor Rhee's leadership and her focus on teaching in the classroom and on removing obstacles to excellence. We believe she has the right kind of experience and background to do an excellent job recruiting talent, raising the quality of education, and holding employees accountable. What will be trickier is ensuring that she is able to corral the resources within DCPS to carry out her vision. Right now, we are working closely with the Chancellor to help her build capacity within her office to address the budgetary and business process issues that have plagued the system for decades. Chancellor Rhee is at her best when her time is freed up to focus on the classroom, and that's where her energies need to be spent, not on the workings and hurdles of the bureaucracy.

The DCPS budget must also be aligned with her vision as soon as possible. Given the lengthy D.C. budget cycle, the Chancellor has barely cleared six months on the job and, in the midst of all that must be done in the school system, she is tasked with unraveling the DCPS budget in order to have a proposal ready five months in advance of the next school year. It is one thing to have to tweak a budget from one year to the next. However, much more must be done than simply tweaking the budget; there is a real need to start from scratch, looking at resources from the classroom on up. This is not a simple task and certainly not one that gets done in a couple of months or without major rethinking of the budget structure. Consider that the school system is also losing students and their per pupil funding allotments at the same time. This is an area where there

certainly is a role for the Chief Financial Officer as well as other independent experts who are able to help with this major challenge. Every year where a budget is passed that is not aligned with the Chancellor's vision for the school system is another missed opportunity.

Along with fixing the budget, this is also the right time to be evaluating the business systems of DCPS – its procurement, personnel, and technology systems. We know that DCPS has not maintained best-in-class systems that should be helping to ease and improve its day-to-day operations. Throwing more money after these systems will be more expensive and less effective in the long run. If there is a need to spend more to make sure that these systems work, are not obsolete, and can be utilized effectively, we believe this is a necessary investment that will yield dividends down the road. Again, the Federal City Council stands ready to help.

There are many actions that we have applauded over the past year. As I mentioned before, the Mayor's decision to assume responsibility for school reform was bold and necessary to have any impact on the D.C. school bureaucracy. Since then, Chancellor Rhee's decision to downsize the central office, intervene in the hiring of principals for the school year, close or restructure underutilized school facilities, and begin negotiations immediately with the teachers' union are all critical first steps. With these actions, she is able to free up resources that can be better spent on academics, and she has raised expectations and hopes for the school system that everyone can share. However, we believe that, underneath it all, it will be essential that the budget and business systems of DCPS work effectively so that these efforts are sustainable over time. This may take time and money, but it is crucial that these improvements happen soon.

In my view, there has been an understandable focus on the DCPS budget and the high level of per pupil spending that we see, compared to other major cities. It is important, at this early stage of reform, to understand that there may be a need for additional costs to fix the things in DCPS that must be fixed in order to

get long-term spending down to a more palatable level. In the private sector, this is a clearly understood maxim. In order to have a more efficient business, you may need to spend money up front on a new billing system or on a new personnel platform. In order to streamline your workforce, you may need to offer financial incentives to spur early retirement or to separate employees who are not performing. The resources that you save can ultimately be reinvested in the right areas, in the classroom and on the things that will help students fulfill their potential.

We look forward to what lies ahead in terms of teacher improvement and leadership development within the D.C. Public Schools. Again, Chancellor Rhee's experience in this field should be an asset in this area. However, success will depend on being able to provide skills and leadership training over the long term, so we welcome any opportunity to participate in this important aspect of reform. We need to reward excellent performers and replicate their successes in the classroom. Those who do not perform and who do not provide the level of quality that is demanded by our parents and students should not be allowed to spend one extra day in our public school classrooms. This approach is used in the private sector to raise the quality and outcomes related to the services we provide, and this should be a model for how we improve our teaching quality and the services we provide children. Unfortunately, we know that proponents of the status quo are organizing and readying themselves to challenge every step in this regard, and it is precisely at this moment when courage, determination, and perseverance are needed. Again, the window of opportunity is open, and it is time for the city to make the most of it.

One last comment is in order. For school reform to work, we strongly believe that there must be a strong partnership between the government and the community. This can take place in many forms. In the days of COPE, one recommendation was to establish an independent broad-based organization that would help raise funds for school initiatives, provide outreach on behalf of schools, establish key partnerships, and otherwise provide an avenue to organize community support into real action. At the right point, we believe that reform in the D.C. Public

Schools will reach a point where the school system can become dependable partners, and perhaps then, a broad-based organized entity in support of school reform can be achieved. We look forward to that time and will continue to work with the Chancellor and the Mayor on helping make school reform a reality this time around.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I am available to answer any questions you might have for me at this time.